No 16

No 37

An Inaugural Dissertation

on

The Use of Cathartics.

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On Cathartics.

Cathartics are defined those substances, which quicken and increase the evacuation from the Intestines by stool. —

Medicines of this class have been employed ever since the first dawn of Physic, and have been administered, with different views and intentions, according to the prevailing theories of the times, or the favorite doctrines of individuals. Thus the judicial astrologers used them at particular times of the moon, and according to the junction and opposition of the planets. The Humoral pathologists gave Cathartics with the intention of expelling peccant matter, which had been separated from the mass of fluids, by the process of fermentation. But these theories are now, almost entirely exploded from practice. Modern practitioners have two objects in view in the exhibition of Purgative medicines; the one is to empty the bowels of their contents, which are in a manner, extraneous to the body, and completely out of the circulation; the other is to cause a greater secretion of fluids into the cavity of the intestines. These substances have thus been divided into two classes. those which produce the former effects are denominated Laxatives or Eccoprotics, and the latter Purgatives, the more active of which are called Drastic Purgatives. —

The action of a Cathartic on the alimentary canal, may be considered as threefold. In the first place it stimulates the muscular fibres of the intestines, and increases their natural peristaltic action, by which their present contents are more quickly discharged. Secondly,

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It stimulates their absorbent vessels, and causes them to pour out a more copious secretion of fluids, and also the excretory ducts of the mucous glands, by which means, the stools are rendered not only quicker, but thinner and more abundant. Thirdly, the stools are much more copious by an additional quantity of fluids, secreted by the Liver, Pancreas &c. And fourthly, the local becomes a general stimulant, hence the increased action of the absorbents and the advantages derived from of this class in certain diseases. Whether Cathartics act in this way in the cure of those diseases is still a matter of doubt. The opinion is supported by the most respectable authorities, that they act by diminishing the quantity of circulating fluids and thus promoting absorption. —

From this consideration of the effects of Cathartics on the system, their utility in some diseases, and their injurious tendency in others, as well as the necessity of varying their degree of activity will be readily understood. Taking into consideration the length of the intestines, as well as the number of vessels, and the ducts of the mucous follicles, and the larger ducts from the Liver, Pancreas &c. opening on their surface, it will be obvious that Purgatives, by opening all these outlets, must occasion a very great general evacuation and consequent diminution of the fluids of the body. Hence in acute inflammatory diseases, in which overdistention of the blood vessels is to be avoided, this evacuation is an excellent expedient, and forms a principal part of the Antiphlogistic plan

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of treatment. It also seems that by purging, another inappreciable advantage is obtained by a change in the distribution of the fluids; thus if an evacuation be made from one set of vessels, the afflux of fluids to these will be increased, and consequently the quantity distributed to other parts of the system will be diminished. Upon this principle we are enabled to explain, in some measure, the beneficial effects derived from Purgatives in the diseases of the head, dependent on increased action, and their injurious tendency in ~~inflammation~~ inflammation of the bowels. —

Whenever the contents of the intestines are morbidly retained from whatever cause, the administration of Cathartics is indicated. If constipation is attended with a flaccid habit, or much flatulence, and irregular distention of the abdomen, some of the warmer Cathartics should be given. But if there is a deficiency of bile, a mercurial purge is most proper. In those cases where costiveness is accompanied with more acute symptoms, as violent pain in Colic, or with pain, ~~diarrhoea~~ and bloody or slimy stools as in Dysentery, or with pain and acute fever as in inflammation of the bowels, Cathartics though necessary must be varied in their nature and mode of administration. For instance in Colic, they should not be used, untill the spasmodic constriction has been overcome by opiates, or the turgid state of the blood vessels is diminished by venaesection. In Dysentery they should

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be alternated with Opiates, otherwise the irritation they produce, will counterbalance the good effects of the evacuation. In Enteritis, the irritation will tend to increase the inflammation and constriction, if they be employed before bloodletting and other remedies have reduced the inflammation.

Cathartics are also indicated, by worms generated in the intestines. —

Cathartics, either purgative or laxative effect are useful in several other affections, partly by exciting the intestines to evacuation, and partly by extending their stimulus to the neighbouring viscera of the abdomen, as in Jaundice and suppression of the Menses.

Another important indication, which Cathartics are capable of fulfilling is, increasing the action of the absorbents. Whether they do this by diminishing arterial action, or by exerting a stimulant effect on these vessels themselves, is a matter of doubt. It appears, in some measure, to be owing to each of these, and thus we explain the manner, in which Cathartics are useful in effusions of fluids into the different cavities of the body. — In Gastritis it is much better to administer these remedies, by way of injection, as they will not irritate the already inflamed stomach, so much, as they would by direct application. — —

Having taken this view of the operation of Cathartics, we shall now proceed to consider more fully their application as remedies to the cure of diseases, and those which naturally present themselves first are the Class of Pyrexiae, and the first of these are the Fevers.

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Febres. I might in this place advance something on the different theories of Fever, which have been produced by some of the most skilful and experienced of our writers. But on this intricate subject, no one has been brought forward, which did not meet with some insuperable objection, and the attempt in a young man, even to comment on them, would be very imprudent and injudicious. Therefore I shall pass them over in silence. Whatever be our theory of Fever, it appears evidently to consist in increased arterial action, and it is manifest that Cathartics which form so important a part of the Antiphlogistic plan must be very efficacious in the treatment of these diseases.

The first that we shall consider is the Typhus Icterodes or Yellow Fever, the late Dr Rush, fully established the utility of Cathartics in this disease, but since his time, the practice has undergone a complete change, and now it is customary to treat this terrible affection with milder remedies. May not this be attributed to a change in the constitution of the atmosphere which so much influences the nature of diseases?

In Inflammatory Fevers, Cathartics which form so principal a part of the Antiphlogistic plan, must be of the utmost importance. Therefore it is the general practice to use these medicines very freely in these cases, with others which have the effect of diminishing arterial action.

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In Intermittent Fevers, I think, they vie with Emetics, and where these do not produce the desired effect of putting a stop to the paroxysm, Cathartics may be resorted to with a very great probability of success. Indeed they are preferred by many practitioners. It has been a contended point, what was the proper stage of an Intermittent, in which to administer a cathartic. It appears evident, that it should be given during the intermission, so that its effects may be over, before the accession of the cold stage, by which means it will frequently be prevented altogether. It is obvious that during the cold stage the fluids are determined to the viscera, and in this state a drastic purge would prove very injurious. However if it becomes necessary to give it just before the ague, some of the warmer cathartics are to be preferred; and where it appears indispensable in the hot stage, the aperient salts are best as they do not stimulate the system so much.

With respect to the administration of Cathartics in Remittent Fever, little doubt exists, as this point is generally agreed upon. Our first indication in the treatment of these fevers, is to evacuate the bile which tends to keep it up. This is most readily accomplished, by the mercurial cathartics, which not only effect this purpose, but also seem to correct that state of the liver, which causes it to be poured out in excess. In fact I know several practitioners, who are very successful in the treatment of these fevers, who give mercurials to evacuate the

bible; and at the same time to bring on gentle ptyalism. Has not salivation been much more efficacious in the cure of these fevers, when brought on by doses sufficient also to evacuate the bowels? By giving purgatives we frequently obtain a remission and finally a complete intermission in which condition, we can more easily manage the disease. We shall next proceed to consider the utility of these medicines in Typhus. The mode of treating this disease, was to give antimonials, merely to evacuate the contents of the bowels and produce diaphoresis, untill Hamilton, to whom posterity cannot express their gratitude in too strong terms, was bold enough to resort to a more active course of practice, and administered purgatives. The success attending this mode of treatment, more than answered his most sanguine expectations. Since that experiment of Dr Hamilton, Typhus has lost much of its mortality. In thirty odd cases of Typhus fever which have come under my own observation, those recovered much more rapidly who were purged. After the operation of the purge the pulse became more full and regular, the tongue lost that brownish fur so characteristic of Typhus, and the countenance became much more lively. — Having made these observations on the order Febres the next which comes under our consideration is that of the Phlegmasiæ, Cathartics are resorted to with very great benefit in some diseases of this order. In Ophthalmia they are frequently used with advantage, more especially in Egyptian Ophthalmia.

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In Chronic cases of Ophthalmia, the utility of long continued purging is fully established. In Phrenitis which is an inflammation of the brain, bloodletting should be resorted to and is much the most efficacious remedy, but an active purge is certainly attended with very great good effects. This has been attributed to what is called producing a revulsion from the head, but Professor Dorsey, who fills his chair, with such dignity and applause to himself and credit to this University, more rationally supposes it to depend on their immense power of depleting the system generally. The administration of purges in this disease should be frequently repeated. —— In Cynanche Malignna, they are very useful. Great benefit is also derived from them in Cynanche Parotidea as is well known to every practitioner conversant with this disease — Cynanche Tracheadis is now generally treated with large doses of Calomel, although this does not constitute the whole of the practice in this terrible disease .— Not much credit is given to Cathartics in the treatment of Pneumonia, although, from their power of evacuating the system, we should be led by theory to resort to them. — In Peritonitis the use of Purgatives is generally condemned but at the same time we must admit that Laxatives are useful to keep the bowels open, when given in the form of Injection.

The same mode of treatment is resorted to in Gastritis, together with venesection .— Hepatitis Acuta. Our learned and ingenious

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Professor Chapman says that inflammation progresses more rapidly in the liver, than in any other part of the body, and can only be arrested by the early and strenuous use of the most active purges and blood-letting. -- In the chronic stage, the administration of purgatives has always been found of the utmost advantage. The application of Epispastics to the region of the liver is of the greatest utility. The practice in Rheumatism has been very various. Professor Chapman is not pleased with the mode of repeated venaesection in this disease as it increases the irritability of the arterial system, but prefers the frequent administration of purgatives as they produce a revulsion (as it were from the bloodvessels. This is one of the most inflammatory diseases to which the human body is subject, and as purging is such an excellent ancillary, we should be led to try the efficacy of these remedies. Professor Chapman says there is a very great affinity, between Rheumatism and Cholera and Diarrhoea. Indeed Diarrhoea and this disease frequently alternate with one another. These diseases are readily subdued by Cathartics. Reasoning from analogy we should be led to treat Rheumatism with purges, or endeavour to produce artificial Diarrhoea. — In Gout the use of Cathartics is strongly indicated when we consider, that it is always preceded by flatulence, constipation nausea and indigestion. Professor Chapman alleges that Gout has a very close connexion with the alimentary canal, and if it can be

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cured by any means, it is by the use of purgatives. The Eau Medicinale so celebrated in Gout, concerning the composition of which, various opinions have been entertained, is nothing more than an active purge sometimes exciting violent vomiting. The irregular Gout attacking the extremities is frequently removed by the coming on of a Diarrhoea. One case of irregular Gout has come under my own observation, which has almost entirely yielded to cooling laxatives. — I think this sufficient to prove that the Gout ought to be attacked by Cathartics. and as there are many instances recorded of a recovery having been performed by them, and as almost every thing else has failed. Having seen how often Cathartics are resorted to in the former orders of this class we press on to the

Exanthemata. There seems to be such a close connexion between the surface of the body and the alimentary canal, that this class of medicines must be very efficacious in the diseases of the skin, for it appears that the most certain and convenient mode of acting on the affections of the surface, is through the medium of the stomach and intestines. - Rubeola. Professor Chapman states that next to venaesection, nothing affords so much relief as the use of laxatives, nor are they less efficacious in Erysipelas. Scarlatina is now generally considered as the same disease with Cynanche Maligna, and Dr Hamilton has fully established the utility of purgatives

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in them. He administered purgatives, not with the intention of producing a large evacuation, but merely to keep the bowels open and to obviate costiveness. This practice has proved very successful. Every person knows how useful cool air is in Small Pox and laxatives to keep the bowels open. — Urticaria sometimes arises from something noxious taken into the stomach. When this is the case, an emetic should be administered immediately to discharge the contents of the stomach, but where no such obvious cause exists it is to be treated with gentle laxatives. —

Hæmorrhages. In active Hæmorrhages, which comprehends perhaps every disease of this order, laxatives as an essential part of the antiphlogistic plan should not be neglected. Even in Phthisis Pulmonalis, in which a fatal Diarrhoea often closes the scene laxatives are used in the first or inflammatory stage. — In Hæmorrhois, purges are very efficacious, when it arises from the irritation of accumulated and hardened feces in the rectum which, I conceive to be much the most frequent cause of this troublesome disease. Even when it originates from any other cause, Cathartics must be of very great service by diminishing arterial action. The purgative to be preferred, should be such as merely to evacuate the intestines, without producing much stimulant effect on the system. There is a variety of Hæmatemesis arising in females, of from 18 to 30 years of age, in which Dr Hamilton

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speaks very highly of the use of cathartics, as an almost infallible remedy. Suppression of the menses or torpor of the alimentary canal seem to be always the cause. — Menorrhagia frequently arises from the feces retained in the rectum, irritating the uterus, and causing the person to strain too hard at stool. Besides it is often brought on by a sedentary life, which always induces costiveness. Therefore I think it would be safe practice to give cathartics for the cure of this disease.

Prolapsus. Where any medicine becomes necessary in cataracts, a purge seemes to be much the easiest mode of curing it. — Dysentery. Whatever doubt there may be about the proper place for this disease in a system of Nosology, there can be none about the use of cathartics in its cure. These when judiciously employed after venaesection, remove the spasmodic constriction of the bowels, carry off the acrid bile, and probably by depleting topically, diminish the local accumulation of fluids which keeps up the disease. —

Having seen how beneficially cathartics are employed in this class of diseases, we shall now proceed to consider their utility in the class of

Neuroses. So intimate is the connexion between the brain and alimentary canal, that when the latter is affected, the former always evinces symptoms of disease, as Headache Vertigo &c. Therefore in diseases of the brain I conceive it to be much the most efficacious plan of proceeding, to administer medicines which act on this organ

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through the medium of the stomach and intestines. Indeed the brain seems to sympathize with the alimentary canal in all its affections, and this being the case is it not probable, that the diseases of the former very frequently originate from those of the latter? Under this impression I shall proceed to consider them. —

Comata. Apoplexy depends on compression of the brain by an extravasated serous or sanguineous fluid. I conceive it to be very rational practice to administer the most active cathartics either with the intention of producing a revulsion from the head, or perhaps of promoting the absorption of the extravasated fluid. So that, with either or both these indications, I think the administration of purgatives, a practice much more apt to succeed in curing Apoplexy than any other. Bleeding will be most beneficial during the presence of the fit and should always be used, but purging seems to afford much the most probable chance of a permanent cure. Professor Chapman was long in the habit of treating Paralysis after the old mode, viz, with Tonics, antispasmodics and astringents, until from his ill success, he was led to observe more particularly, this disease, and seeing the connexion between it and Apoplexy, he was induced to try the purgative plan, which had proved so beneficial in his hands in the latter disease. His success equalled his most sanguine hopes, so that he has long been in the habit of treating this disease with the most drastic purgatives. — Having taken this view of the

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utility of Cathartics in this order of diseases, we shall now consider them as remedies in the

Adynamia. Dyspepsia seems to arise from an atony of the stomach, probably depending on a diseased state of the liver. Indeed it appears extremely probable, that Dyspepsia and Hypochondriasis may originate from the affections of the liver, as in all of them, the bile is either diminished in quantity or vitiated in quality. Is anything more efficacious in exciting the action of the stomach, or in correcting the vitiated secretion of bile or in emulging the biliary ducts, than the use of Purgatives? At least they are of the utmost utility in these diseases, by keeping the bowels open and obviating costiveness, which is a constant attendant on these affections. It is surprising that no one was led before Dr Hamilton to consider Chlorosis as depending on a diseased condition of the alimentary canal, when we come to observe the symptoms, such as constipation of the bowels, disordered stomach, depraved appetite, dry skin, paleness, nervous affections and symptoms of debility. But he with his usual acuteness of observation, distinguished it and treated it accordingly with purgatives, in which practice he was so successful that posterity have not forgotten his lessons. This disease is rare in this country.- We shall next consider the order of

Spasmi, and the first which presents itself is Tetanus. This disease is divided into Idiopathic and Symptomatic. The former arising from

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cold &c. the latter from wounds. In both of these the alimentary canal seems to be very much affected, and from its analogy to Trismus Nascentium, which is caused by retention of the meconium, we should be led to suppose that Tetanus ought to be treated with Purgatives. Cathartics have generally been given in this disease, but only with a secondary view. Epilepsy from its symptoms, seems to be intimately connected with the alimentary canal. These are acidity in the stomach, flatulence, long constipation of the bowels &c. From not succeeding with any of the modes of practice hitherto recommended, Professor Chapman was led to try the purgative plan, and was gratified very much with his success. At the same times, venaesection, if required, from the state of the patient should also be used, and tonics if proper. Even Sydenham hints at this mode of practice, when in speaking of Chorea, he says "and I can hardly help but the Epilepsy in grown persons will yield to the same method (Viz bleeding and purging) provided the remedies prescribed be properly adapted to the age of the several patients". Attention should also be paid to bowels. Sydenham advised bleeding and purging in Chorea, but posterity inattentive to the instructions of this accurate observer, administered tonics and various other remedies with little or no success, untill Dr Hamilton with that boldness of innovation, which characterises his practice, again resorted to bloodletting and purging, with what success the world well knows. He says in some cases gentle purges will

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suffice, but when the disease is confirmed, it requires the exhibition of the most drastic Cathartics, so that the effects of one dose may support those of the one preceding. — One of the most prominent symptoms of Asthma is Dyspepsia. Is it not probable that purgatives, which are so successful in the management of this, would alleviate the distress occasioned by the disease? — The next which comes under our observation is Colic. This disease appears to be intimately connected with the affections of the liver and stomach. It is divided into three species, the Bilious, Flatulent and Hysteric, in each of which the treatment is nearly the same and consists in administering an opiate to remove the constriction and procure immediate relief and an active purge to carry off, any offending matter which may have caused it. — Purgatives are also very useful in Colica Pictonum, when the spasm has been overcome by antispasmodics. — In Cholera the principal indication seems to be to put a stop to the disease, by opiates, and afterwards to administer a Cathartic to evacuate the corrupted bile. We now proceed to Diabetes which appears to arise from some imperfect action in the chylopoietic viscera, and the first indication is to correct this. Why should not purgatives fulfil this as well if not better than any other remedy? — The symptoms of Hysteria show great morbid derangement in the alimentary canal, such as shifting pains in the abdomen flatulence, constipation at one time, and at another vomiting and

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Vesania. We now come to the more terrible disease Mania, in which Cathartics are found to be of the utmost utility. The ancients treated Mania with Black Hellebore purges, which roused the torpid system or produced a revulsion from the head. The drastic purges are best, which may torment the bowels. Venæsection is commonly employed, but where this fails, the active purges must be resorted to, and they will frequently cure the disease. --- We now shall proceed to consider cathartics in the class of

Cachexia. Dropsey. A great number of remedies have been resorted to for the cure of this disease, but none with the success which has attended the administration of cathartics. This disease is divided into several species according to the situation of the effused fluid. The first is Anasarca in which the water is poured out into the cellular substance of the body. One of the most frequent causes of it is some visceral obstruction. Purgatives may be employed either with the intention of promoting the absorption of the fluid or to remove the obstruction which caused it.

The second is Hydrocephalus, which Professor Chapman thinks is nothing more than a morbid affection of the brain sympathizing with the alimentary canal and says, whatever be our theory of this frightful disease, it

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is certain that active purging will cure it. They are useful by lessening the determination of blood to the head. The third is Hydrothorax, in which purgatives are not much used, but may be beneficial by promoting absorption. Professor Chapman's favorite remedy in this affection is Calomel combined with Squills, to promote expectoration and at the same time to produce gentle ptyalism. The fourth is Ascites which is frequently combined with all the other forms of this disease, and often very difficult of cure. When it is caused by an obstruction of some of the viscera, active purges are indicated, as they tend to remove the obstruction and also to promote absorption. Taking our leave of this class of diseases, we next pass on to the Scales, and the first which presents itself as worthy of notice is Amenorrhoea. This is divided into two kinds; one in which the menses do not begin to flow at the general period of life, and the other, where they have actually made their appearance, and cease to return from other causes than conception. The first is called Retention, the last Suppression of the menses. Retention of the Menses or Chlorosis is always accompanied with costiveness, faculent odour of the breath, disordered stomach depraved appetite, impaired digestion, flatulence and acidity in the stomach and bowels. If these symptoms do not indicate the use of Purgatives what does? This disease remained in obscurity until Dr Hamilton, with his usual minuteness of observation, developed to the world the theory and practice in this disease, which consists in actively purging the patient

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for some length of time. Besides Calomel is generally prohibited in the diseases of pregnancy from its violent action on the Uterus. That Cathartics should be administered in suppression of the Menses as obvious from what has been said in the foregoing disease. The same will suffice about the propriety of using them in Dysmenorrhoea. —

Having thus enquired into the utility of Purgatives in the diseases of adults we shall very briefly state, that in those of Infants, Cathartics are scarcely ever to be omitted. Indeed they constitute the principal part of the treatment in almost every disease to which the infant state is subject.

The necessity of using Laxatives, in women, at the period of the cessation of the menses, must be evident as they keep the bowels regular, which are almost always affected at this time, and tend to keep up a healthy action in the Uterus. This course will frequently obviate many of those Chronic complaints which arise about this time of life. —

We have briefly noticed the principal diseases in which Purgatives are useful. We cannot conclude, without observing, that we do not recollect any affection of the human body, in which the state of the bowels can, with any propriety be overlooked.

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